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The Declining Enrollment Problem in the Elementary Schools of Hamlin County

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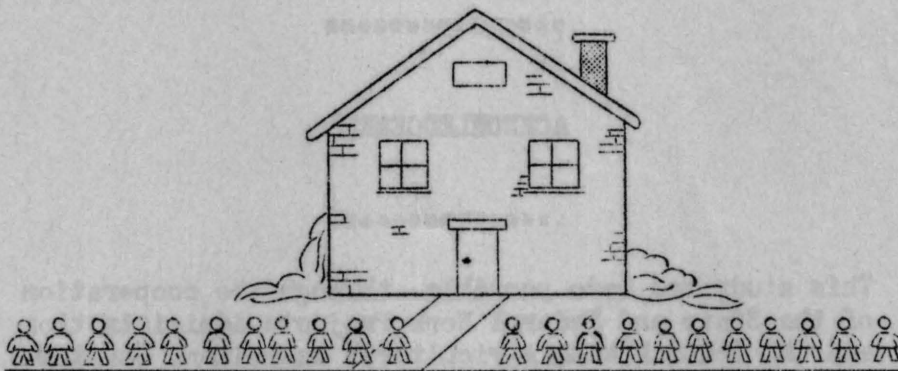
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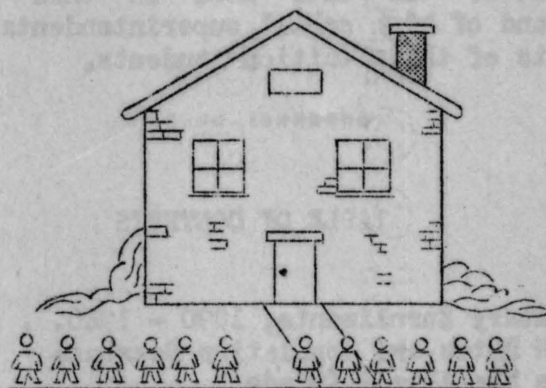
THE DECLINING ENROLLMENT PROBLEM
in
The Elementary Schools
of
Hamlin County

W. F. Kumlien
Howard M. Sauer
C. Scandrette

1920



In 1920 there was an average of 22 pupils per rural school



but by 1940 the average enrollment had shrunk to 12 pupils

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Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, Brookings, South Dakota

EXPLANATORY NOTE

During recent years, enrollments in most South Dakota elementary schools have declined at a very rapid rate. The prevailing type of rural school district organization in most counties has proved rather ineffective in coping with dwindling enrollments and with the consequent high costs per pupil.

It is the purpose of this pamphlet to assist educators, school board members and other Hamlin county leaders, by analyzing the nature of the problem and by presenting suggestions for its solution as they have grown out of the experiences of other South Dakota communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This study was made possible through the cooperation of the State and Federal Work Projects Administration and the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station. The project is officially designated as W. P. A. Project No. 665-74-3-143. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Mrs. Doris Eadwine, the Hamlin County Superintendent of Schools, from whose office most of the data used in this study was secured; and of high school superintendents who supplied lists of their tuition students.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

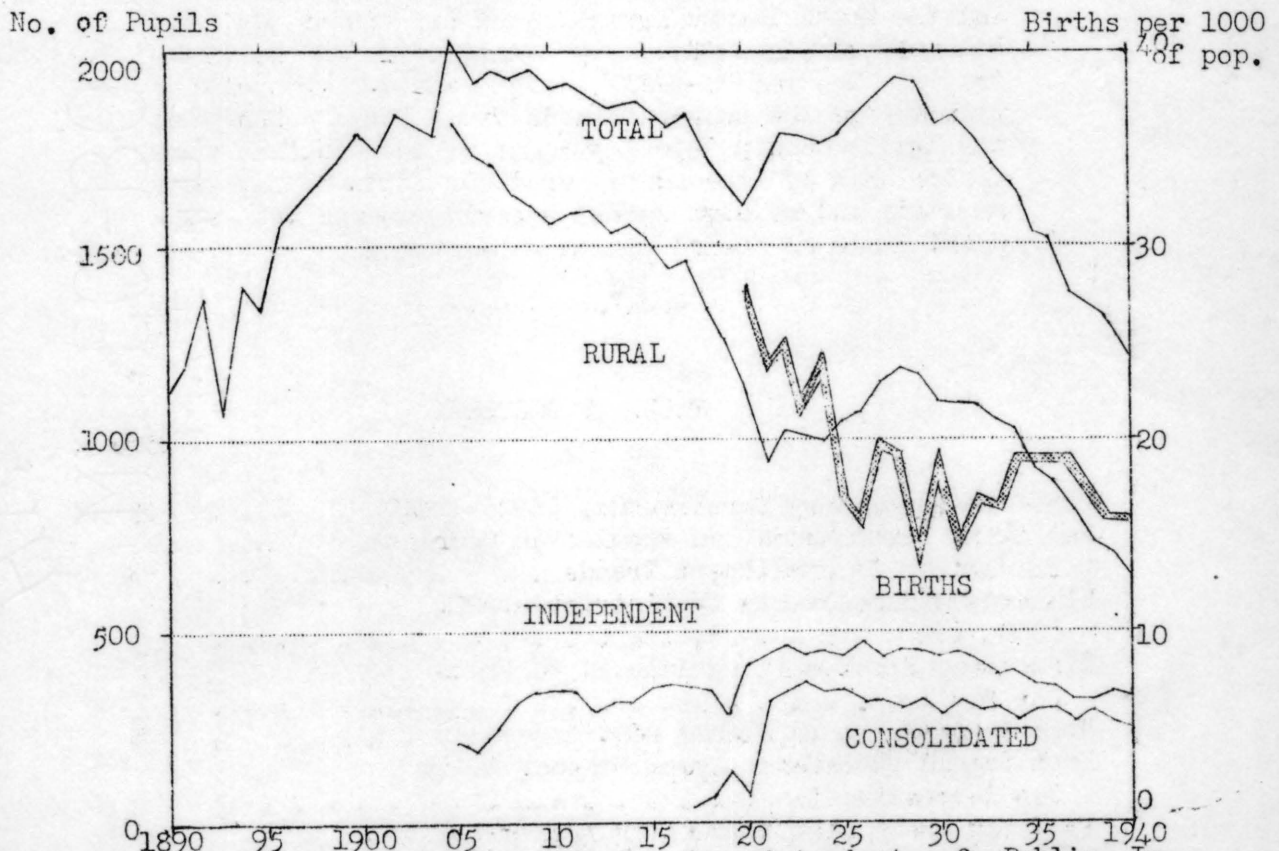
	Page
Trend in Elementary Enrollments, 1890 - 1940.	1
Declining Birth Rates and Population Decrease as Factors in Enrollment Trends	2
Elementary Enrollments by District--1920, 1930, 1940.	3
Elementary Enrollment as Related to Costs Per Pupil	4
When Schools can be Closed Advantageously	5
High School Attendance Areas Suggest Basis for Reorganization	6
Improved Roads Show Increasing Accessibility of Farm Areas to Village Service Centers.	7
How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities are Successfully Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem.	8

Elementary School Enrollment in Hamlin County 1890-1940

Population experts have been predicting for a number of years, that the downward trend of the birth rate will cause a serious decline in the elementary school enrollment. The fulfillment of this prediction in Hamlin county is indicated by Figure 1. Since 1905 the Hamlin county enrollment has steadily declined, with the exception of a short period of gain climaxed in 1928 by an enrollment of 1,933 pupils. The decline which followed left the 1940 enrollment at 1,225, retrogressing toward the 1890 enrollment mark. Rural school enrollments show a sharper decline than either the independent or consolidated schools, with a drop from 1,185 pupils in 1928 to 651 pupils in 1940. Independent schools suffered a drop only from 450 to 329 in the same period.

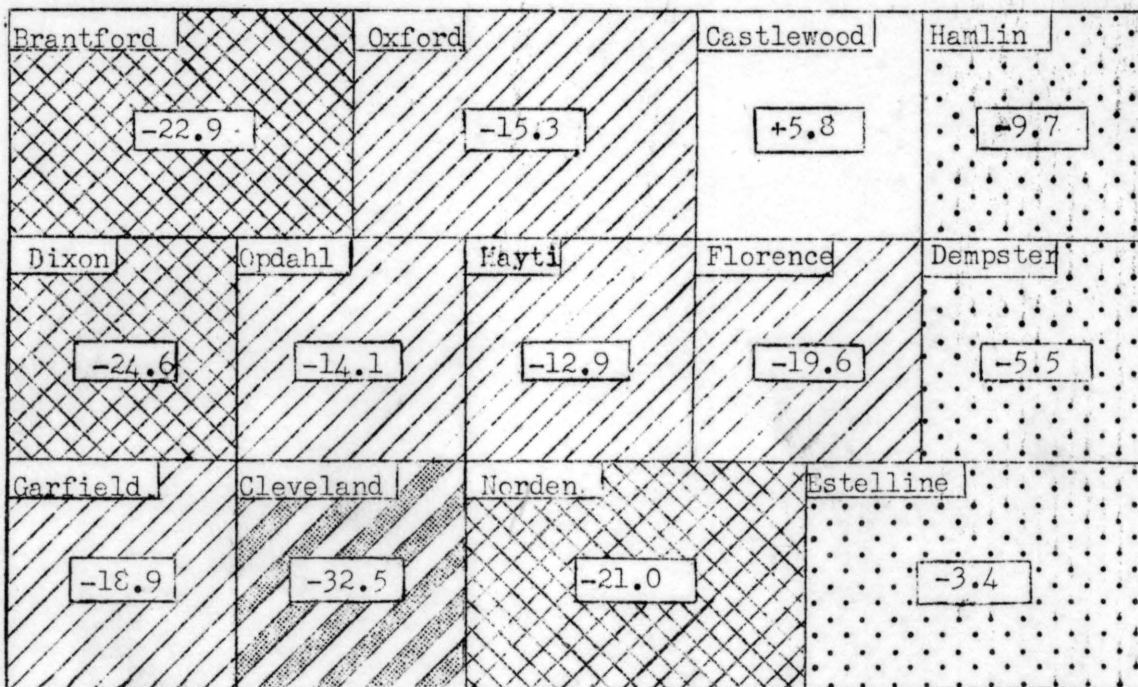
The Hamlin county birth rate traces graphically a sharp decline, a gain, and from there a gradual loss, as does the total enrollment. From a peak of 27.8 births per 1000 of the population in 1920, the birth rate has dropped to the 1940 average of 15.9 per 1000 of the population. The decrease in birth rate has resulted in a steady decrease of children who reach the elementary school age.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Hamlin County 1890-1940,
and Birth Rate Trend 1920-1940



Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction and Reports of the State Board of Health.

Figure 2. Population Gains or Losses in Hamlin County, 1930 - 1940.



Legend:

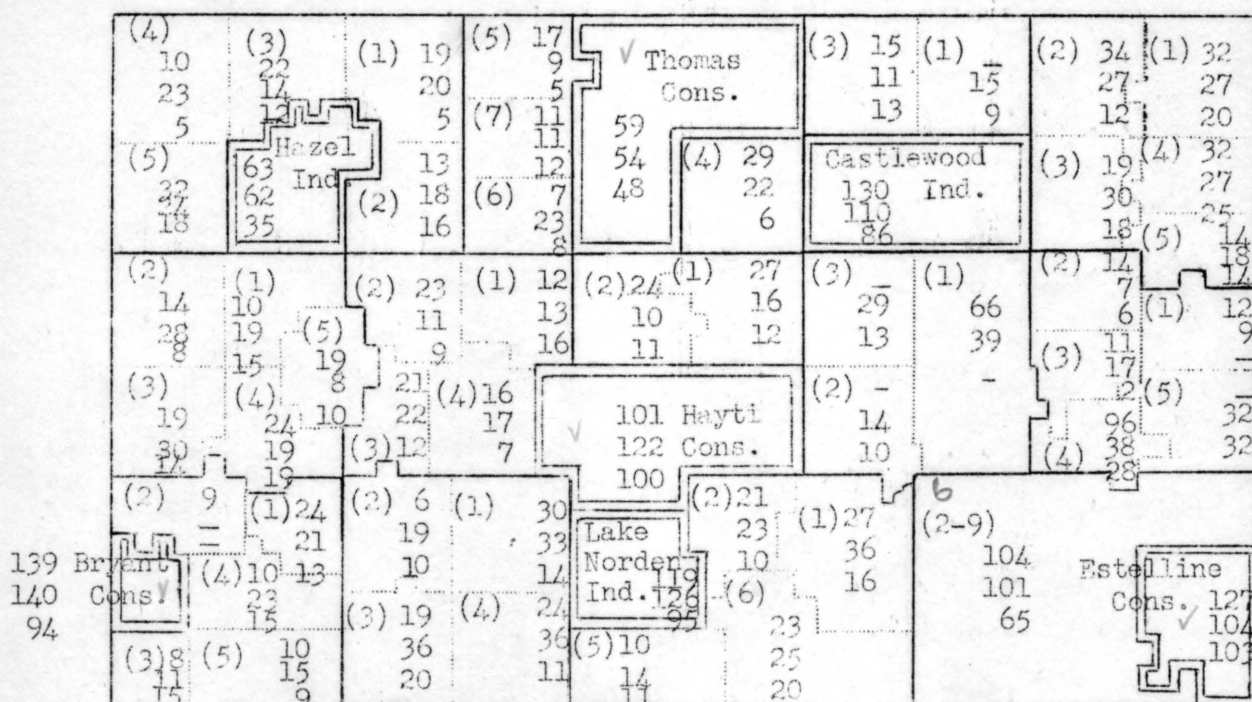
Gained	Lost 10.0 - 19.9%	Lost 30.0% or more
Lost 0.0-9.9%	Lost 20.0 - 29.9%	

Source: Fifteenth U. S. Census, 1930 and Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940

Population losses through outward migration have as direct an influence on the declining elementary enrollment as does the decreasing birth rate. A population loss of only 8.9 percent was experienced by Hamlin county, between 1930-1940, but this slight decline in population is very closely related to the rural enrollment decline in the district. During the same period, 1930-1940, Hayti, the county seat, showed a 7.6 percent increase in population, and the combined population for the incorporated towns of the district showed a 5.9 percent increase. Thus it is apparent that the bulk of the population losses was suffered by the rural areas, a fact which is reflected in the relatively greater decline in rural enrollments.

With the exception of Castlewood, all of the townships of Hamlin county lost in population during the 1930-1940 period. Losses ranged from 3.4 percent in Estelline township to 32.5 percent loss in Cleveland township. The direct relation of population loss to enrollment decrease may be seen by comparing Figures 2 and 3. The percentage of enrollment decline is usually greatest in counties with the largest percent of population loss. Estelline county in this case suffered a 35.6 percent loss in enrollment from 1930-1940, while Cleveland suffered a 51.75 percent loss.

Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in Hamlin County Districts,
1920, 1930, 1940



Legend: Top figure 1920 enrollment Middle figure 1930 enrollment
Lower figure 1940 enrollment

() Indicates District number

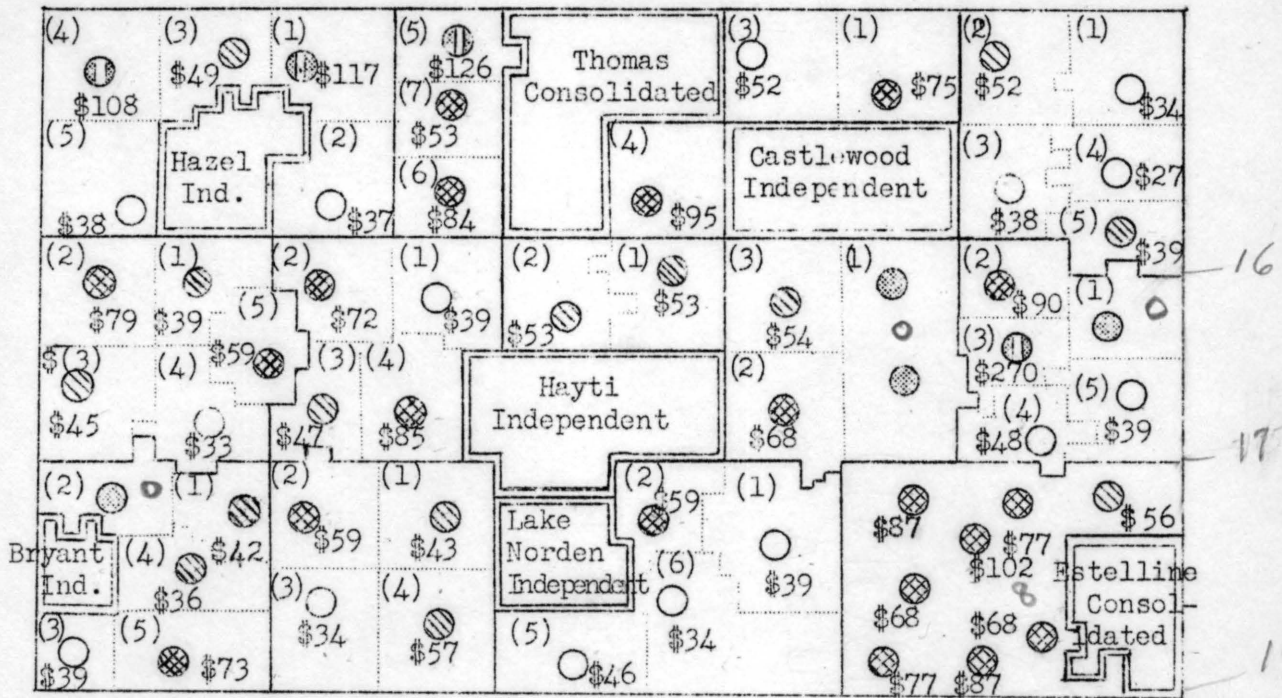
Source: Records of Hamlin County Superintendent of Schools

In 1940, 53 elementary schools were in operation in Hamlin county, in addition to the independent schools of Castlewood, Lake Norden, Hazel, and the consolidated schools of Thomas, Bryant, Estelline, and Hayti.

The general downward trend of elementary enrollment is indicated in Figure 3, which lists the enrollment of each county district for 1920, 1930, and 1940. While there were a few districts that gained in enrollment during the periods 1920-1930, and 1930-1940, a large majority showed a loss. In fact, of the 56 districts in the county, 47 showed a loss in enrollment for 1940 as compared with the 1930 figures. In 1940 three schools had been closed, four were operating with five or less pupils and 19 schools had only six to ten pupils.

A comparison of the enrollment figures for 1940 with those of 1920 shows the enrollment decline clearly. In 1920 there were 1,131 rural school pupils enrolled, compared to 651 in 1940. While there was an average of 21.75 pupils per school in 1920, there was an average of only 12.3 pupils in 1940. Barring unforeseen population changes, further enrollment losses may be expected in coming years, although the rate of decline may not be so rapid.

Figure 4. Instructional Cost Per Pupil by Size of School, in Hamlin County, 1940



Legend:

- Closed school
- 5 or fewer pupils
- ⊗ 6 - 10 pupils
- ⊘ 11 - 15 pupils
- 16 or more pupils

Figures below circles represent cost per pupil

Source: Records of Hamlin County Superintendent of Schools

As Figure 4 indicates, a wide variation is found in the cost per pupil in the schools of Hamlin county. In general, the schools with the lowest enrollment, average the greatest per pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Hamlin county ranged from \$33 in District 4, Dixon township, where the school enrolled 19 pupils, to \$270 in District 3, Dempster township, where there was an enrollment of only two pupils.

Table 1 (below) is another numerical indication that the operation of schools for 10 or fewer pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis. This fact is particularly true for schools enrolling only five or fewer pupils. The average cost per pupil for the four schools of this latter group was \$135, as compared to \$51.80, the average for all schools.

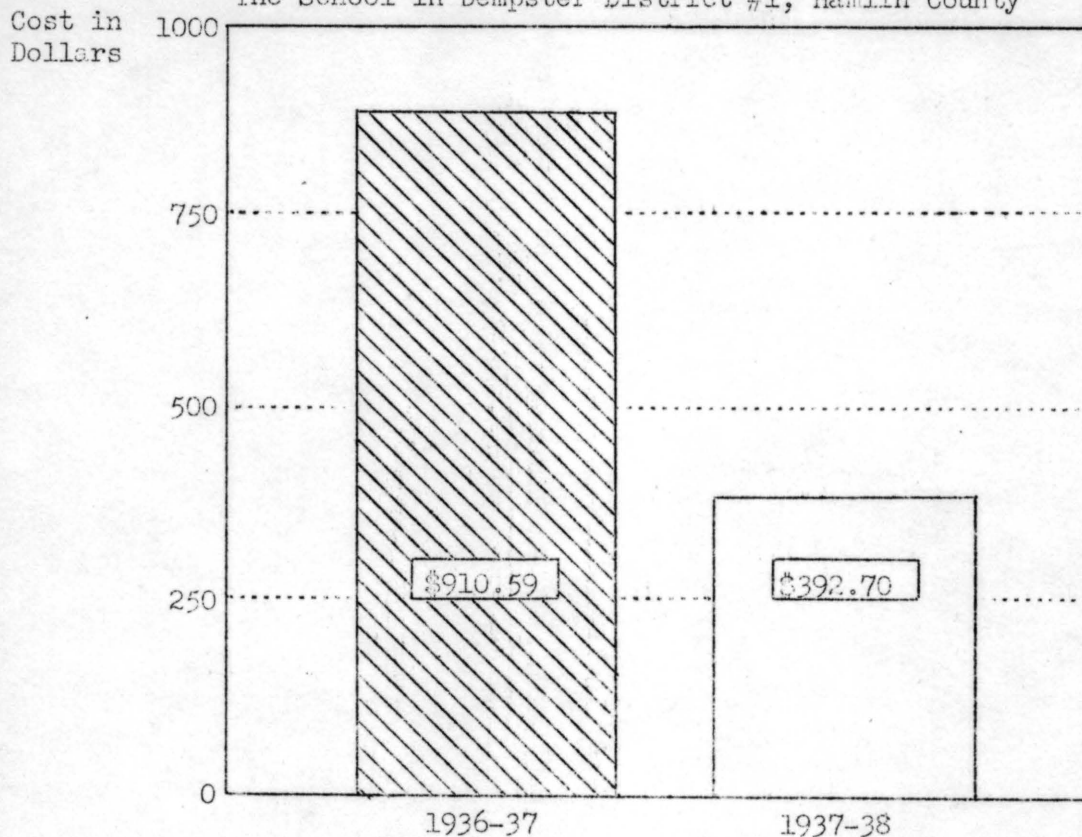
Table 1. Instructional Cost Per Pupil For Operating Schools of Various Sizes in Hamlin County, 1940*

Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Total Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	56	651	\$33,773.00	\$51.80
Closed Schools	3	—	—	—
5 or fewer pupils	4	17	2,295.00	135.00
6 - 10 pupils	19	154	11,574.00	75.16
11- 15 pupils	17	215	10,184.00	47.37
16 or more pupils	13	265	9,720.00	36.68

* Based on teacher's salaries only.

Source: Records of the Hamlin County Superintendent of Schools.

Figure 5. Cost of Maintaining Educational Facilities Before and After Closing The School in Dempster District #1, Hamlin County



Source: Records of Hamlin County Superintendent of Schools

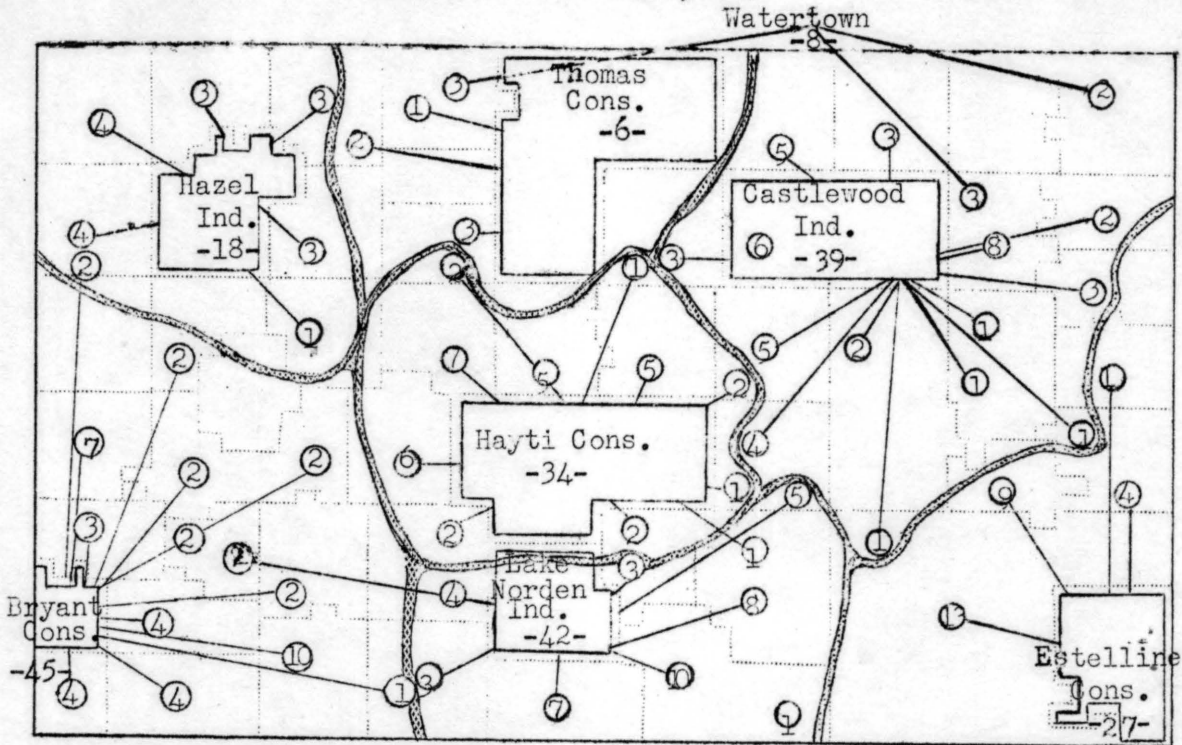
As a means of reducing high per pupil costs, school districts throughout South Dakota have, during recent years, closed a large number of schools, particularly those with diminishing enrollments.

During the 1936-37 school term, school operation costs for District 1, Dempster township, totaled \$910.59. The following year the school was closed and the pupils were sent to another district with the home district paying the tuition and transportation bills. That year it cost District 1, Dempster, \$392.70, a saving of \$511.89.

Since the cost per pupil increases as the number of pupils attending school decreases, and because there is a lack of intellectual stimulation which comes through competition,*it seems advisable both from the standpoint of economy and educational efficiency to close a school when the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.

* It is common knowledge among teachers that where there are only one or two pupils to a grade it is usually difficult to get students interested.

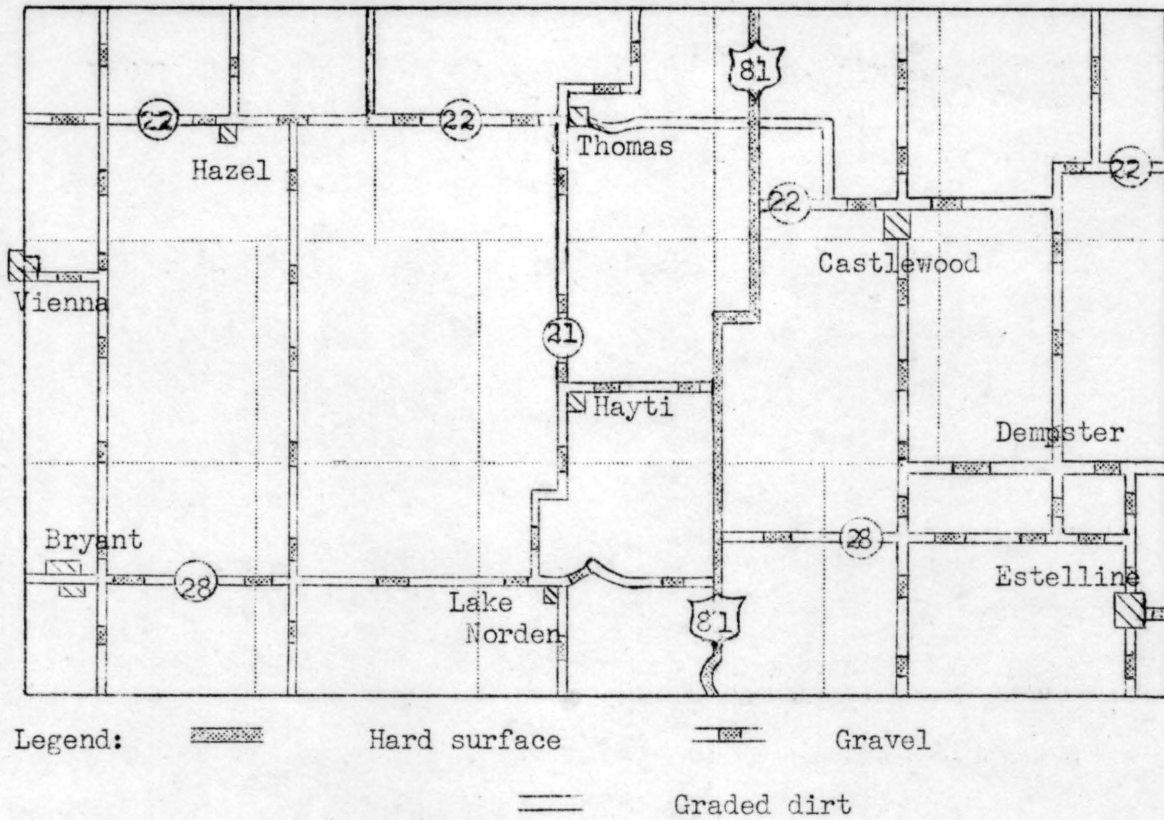
Figure 6. Open County Areas For Hamlin County, From Which High Schools Drew Their Students, 1940



Source: Records of High School Superintendents, 1940

Since 1921 it has been compulsory in South Dakota for school districts without high schools of their own to pay tuition costs for their students who attend high school outside the district. Figure 6 shows the areas from which high schools drew their Hamlin county tuition students, numbering 219 in 1940. Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary school would be prohibitive, the people of the districts of Hamlin county adopted the policy of sending their students to high schools already existing in town and village centers. Perhaps a similar plan could be adapted to elementary education. As elementary enrollments continue to shrink and cost per pupil mount, it would appear to be a practical solution to close the rural schools and send the remaining pupils to village schools. In such a plan the home district would pay tuition and transportation costs. This plan has the advantage of economy, and of extending to farm children the superior facilities and techniques of the town school.

Figure 7. Highway System in Hamlin County, 1941



Source: Official Map State Highway Commission, 1941.

As may be seen in Figure 7, improved roads are found in most portions of the county. Good roads, together with the automobile, have placed the towns of the county within easy reach of a vast majority of farm families, revolutionizing many aspects of rural life. A number of services formerly performed by open-country institutions on a neighborhood basis have been shifted to town and village centers. Cases in point are the crossroads general store and the open-country church. The farmer finds it increasingly convenient to go to the village center to buy groceries, clothing, and other necessities; to sell his produce; to attend church; and to engage in various forms of recreation. In addition, the farmer finds it increasingly convenient to send his sons and daughters to the village high school.

In view of the trend toward concentration of service it would be a natural occurrence for many of the younger children to be taken into the village to attend elementary schools. Since village enrollments have also declined, the pupils from farming areas could probably be absorbed into the village and city schools without any great expansion of existing schools.

- 8 -

How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities Are Successfully Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem

School boards confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study their local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have all been tested by different South Dakota communities and have been found practical. One or the other of the first two alternatives has frequently been used as a temporary measure until further action was necessary. The last two plans are in the nature of a more or less permanent reorganization of the present rural district system.

Cooperating with nearby rural schools

When enrollment has dropped to five or fewer pupils certain districts have kept their district organization intact but have closed one or more schools. In cases where all schools of the district have been closed, the remaining pupils have been sent to the nearest adjoining rural school where satisfactory arrangements for tuition and transportation could be made.

Tuition pupils to town schools

Where satisfactory arrangements could not be made with nearby rural schools, the remaining pupils have been sent as tuition students to the nearest independent school in village or town. This plan is frequently no more expensive than the first, but has the further advantage of better educational experience than is usually possible in the one room school. In effect, it is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in sending farm children as tuition pupils to high school.

Consolidation

Where the second plan has been in operation for a number of years, town and nearby country districts have frequently consolidated into a single district. Such a plan has many advantages, but should first be tried out informally as a centralized school system before determining the details of consolidation.

County-wide district plan

In at least one west river county a county-wide district plan is now in operation. Under such a plan one county school board determines the location of rural schools and can regulate the number of such schools to fit in with the enrollment trend.